

[Review] Salman Abu Sitta(2016) Mapping my return: a Palestinian memoir

Article (Accepted Version)

Irfan, Anne (2017) [Review] Salman Abu Sitta(2016) Mapping my return: a Palestinian memoir. British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 44 (2). pp. 283-284. ISSN 1353-0194

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/70542/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Mapping My Return: A Palestinian Memoir

Salman Abu Sitta

New York, Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 2016, 332 pp.

With *Mapping My Return*, Salman Abu Sitta makes the latest contribution to the growing genre of Palestinian refugee memoirs in English, building on previous efforts by Fawaz Turki and more recently Ghada Karmi, Abdel Bari Atwan and Ramzy Baroud. Abu Sitta is most known for his ground-breaking project mapping historic Palestine and developing a practical plan for implementing the right of return, which provides the thematic basis for this memoir. Indeed, he states in the Preface that his purpose in telling his story is to convey the true background to the Palestinian struggle (p. xi).

As a memoir, *Mapping My Return* is organised chronologically, charting the author's childhood in southern Palestine, the trauma of the Nakba, and his subsequent exile in Egypt, Kuwait, England and Canada. Throughout, his individual experiences are interspersed with major events in Palestinian history. Abu Sitta eloquently employs his own life story and those of his relatives to argue for the refugees' return as an essential requirement for justice and lasting peace. Striking a more scholarly tone than some of the aforementioned memoirs, he refers to numerous academic texts and primary sources to make his case. As is suggested in the Preface (p. xi), this means that the memoir can also serve as an introductory guide to Palestinian refugee history, enabling readers to probe the subject more thoroughly should they wish.

Abu Sitta was 10 years old in 1948, which gives his account an added historical value as the number of survivors from the Nakba generation continues to fall. While *Mapping My Return* focuses on the refugee experience, the first four chapters cover life in pre-1948 Palestine and provide potential source material to scholars of the Mandate period and Palestinian social and labour history. The depth and detail of these chapters is effective in drawing the reader in and making the subsequent shock of the Nakba especially evocative. Abu Sitta dedicates three full chapters (5-7) to covering the latter, and in doing so conveys the chaos and confusion of what was experienced by most people as a series of cataclysmic events rather than a singular rupture.

One of this book's greatest strengths lies in its expression of the turmoil, insecurity and pain of ongoing forced exile. Abu Sitta's description of the fear, anxiety and vulnerability of Palestinians in Kuwait during the First Gulf War (chapter 18) is particularly powerful in highlighting what it means to be stateless. Meanwhile his own story is that of the 'schizophrenic life' (p. 230) of a Palestinian refugee in the West, most notably in the often racist setting of 1960s London (chapter 14). More exposition of the personal impact of this disjointed experience would enrich the autobiographical aspect of the book and add some psychological nuance to its comprehensive political history.

The last four chapters (19-22) delve into the process of Abu Sitta's mapping work, carried out over several decades, which resulted in the critical discovery that the majority of village sites depopulated in 1948 remain unoccupied (pp. 300-301). His account of the meticulous research he conducted in archives across the world (pp. 269-272) will be of great interest to scholars of Palestinian history and is frustratingly limited. Abu Sitta states that documents from Mandatory Palestine are scattered across the UK (p. 257), while valuable sources on older Palestinian history can be found at numerous libraries and archives across the Middle East, Europe and North America (p. 270). More detail on this, even in the form of an Appendix, would doubtless be of great value to many researchers, and would not be out of place here given its centrality to Abu Sitta's life and works.

This book's most important contribution to the scholarship may lie in Abu Sitta's subtle refutation of the notion that Palestinian refugees were passive victims of an unwelcome fate. They are portrayed here instead as determinedly seizing every opportunity to improve their situation, be it by attempting to return to their lands after 1948 (chapter 9), preserving their identity and social structures in refugee camps (p. 95), or campaigning for their national political rights in exile (pp. 197-226).

Where the memoirs of Atwan and Baroud stand out for their respective vibrant humour and dramatic storytelling, *Mapping My Return* draws its greatest value from its successful depiction of the intersection between individual stories and broader national history. Watershed events like the Nakba, the Naksa and the first intifada are recalled through an array of personal stories that effectively convey their magnitude and impact. As a comprehensive account of nearly a century of Palestinian history, this book is an invaluable resource anyone with an interest in the experiences and records of Palestinian refugees.

Anne Irfan
London School of Economics
a.e.irfan@lse.ac.uk